

Lent Compline Talks 2016

St Mary's Kidlington
Sunday 20th March
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The Eucharist: This is my body; this is my blood

This week we come to the very heart of the Eucharist elements of the last supper that are found in the synoptic gospels. They are also in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, which was probably written before any of the Gospels and is therefore a very early tradition, and Paul, we know, had been in contact with Peter and James in Jerusalem, though in this passage you'll note that Paul says he "received it directly from the Lord". I'm going to read from that section (Chapter 11, verses 23-26; NEB version) "For the tradition which I handed on to you came to me from the Lord himself: that the Lord Jesus, on the night of his arrest, took bread and, after giving thanks to God, broke it and said "This is my body, which is for you, do this as a memorial of me." In the same way he took the cup after supper and said "This cup is the new covenant sealed with my blood. Whenever you drink it, do this as a memorial of me". It's not clear whether the next sentence is Jesus or Paul speaking. I suspect the latter because it reflects the expectation of the early church of the imminent return of Jesus to earth. "For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord, until he comes."

We are now so familiar with it these words, that the enormity of talking about eating Jesus' body no longer disturbs us; but just consider how it must sound to a non-believer. The concept of eating the body of a god, like the origin of all religious rituals, is not new but shrouded in the mists of time. Frazer in 'The Golden Bough' cites evidence that the human representative of the corn spirit was killed annually and eaten in Europe; this persisted symbolically at La Palisse in France in which a man made of dough is hung on a fir tree which is carried on the last harvest wagon; it was kept till the vintage was over, then at the close of the harvest celebrated by a feast at which the mayor breaks the dough-man in pieces and gives them to the people to eat. Similarly when the Spaniards conquered Mexico they discovered that the Aztecs each May made a dough image of their god Vitzilputzli which was broken in pieces and sacramentally eaten. Similar rituals were found in pre-Christian India. In Judaism what may have been earlier human sacrifices had become replaced with the animal sacrifices that had become such a feature of the Temple cult in the time of Jesus.

But turning to the Last Supper, if we start with the bread, the words in Matthew, Mark and Luke are almost identical with those in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. The phrase in the synoptics and Paul has three parts to it. First: 'This is my body'; second 'which is for you' or 'given for you' or 'broken for you' or in Mark 'for many'; then third 'do this in memory of me'. First, speaking about the bread, "this is my body". I don't want to discuss how this led to the whole transubstantiation issue. The bread that we use is even more obviously symbolic than the bread-men I mentioned in France and Mexico. The symbolism of the bread and Christ's body immediately makes us think of bread as an essential of life. It is only in John's gospel that we have the long discourse from Jesus when he was preaching in a synagogue in Capernaum; he refers back to the feeding of the 5000, says that his listeners must work not for perishable food but for the food of eternal life. He speaks about the manna in the wilderness – God's bread from heaven. Then he goes on to tell

them in that familiar passage “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never be hungry. And in the much-loved start of John’s gospel we find “the word became flesh and dwelt among us”. So in the last supper we have Jesus in the flesh, who has spoken of himself as the bread of life and knowing that his end was near talking of the bread being broken at the meal standing symbolically for his body.

The second part of the phrase “for you, or given/broken for you” could have referred just to the disciples, but of course refers to us as well because we have Jesus’s promise “whoever comes to me shall never be hungry” – our weekly communion bread as the essential nourishment for our spiritual life.

The third part of the phrase “do this in memory of me” is very straightforward but of course is much more than just ‘bring me to mind’. If we are to honour Jesus’ memory we must, as Jesus himself put it ‘do the will of will of our Father who is in heaven’. We will return to this aspect on Tuesday.

So now let’s turn to the cup of wine. Did you spot the subtle but perhaps important difference between what I read from Paul and the words that we hear so regularly from the priest in our own Eucharist? While the part on the bread/body is more nearly identical ‘he broke it and gave it to his disciples saying “Take, eat, this is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me” that on the cup of wine is subtly different. In Paul’s account (which is almost the same in Luke) “This cup is the new covenant sealed with my blood.. (or new testament in my blood; authorized version)” whereas the words of our Eucharistic Prayer echo what is in Mark and Matthew “*this is my blood*, the blood of the new covenant”. A subtle but perhaps very important difference because (as Gerd Theissen points out in “The Historical Jesus”) for Jesus – as a very observant Jew – the whole idea of drinking blood would have been unthinkable. One might of course argue that Jesus was always thinking differently and in a new way and you may feel that the whole distinction is unimportant, but for me the idea of the cup at the last supper sealing Jesus’ new covenant or commandment “love one another as I have loved you” seems to ring more true. Given the almost continuous sacrifice of animals that was a part of temple worship at the time, the concept of sacrificial sealing the covenant between the Jews and God would not have seemed at all strange. Of course, Christ’s blood **was** shed for us – he would have bled when the crown of thorns was pushed down on his head, when the nails were hammered through his wrists and ankles, and yet again when the soldier pieced his side with a spear. So the version in Matthew and Mark perhaps reflected the way in which hindsight can influence memory. It may also reflect the growing idea, in the Hellenic church, of Christ as the Lamb of God sacrificed for us.

Whether or not the Last Supper was actually a Passover meal, which we looked at earlier, wine would certainly have been drunk. Indeed in the traditional Passover meal there were 4 cups: the first ‘kiddush cup’ before the meal with a blessing; the second haggadah cup when the special features of the Passover meal is explained; the third ‘cup of blessing’ when the lamb and herbs are eaten and the fourth ‘hallel’ cup as thanksgiving. In our Eucharist the cup would be one of the last two. Indeed, whenever we take the cup of wine into our hands and take a small sip, we give thanks for all that Jesus has done for us in his life and in his death.

Finally as we noted earlier in this series of talks, John’s Gospel places the last supper before the actual Passover, and his account of the meal makes no reference to the bread and the

wine or any words of Jesus related to them. However, if we go back to that earlier part of John's gospel when he is preaching in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus says things that are very reminiscent of the statements at the last supper. He says "I am that living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats this bread he shall live for ever. The bread which I will give is my own flesh; I give it for the life of the world."

And it is not just bread and flesh that Jesus talks about. The passage goes on. "This led to a fierce dispute among the Jews 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' They said. Jesus replied "In very truth I tell you unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man *and drink his blood* you can have no life in you." "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood possesses eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day"

So, the symbolic bread and cup of our Eucharist are not only the essential nourishment for our spiritual journey in this life, not only our thanksgiving for all that Jesus has done for us, but also the key to eternal life with Jesus, in the kingdom – heaven – that he shares with His Father.